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ABSTRACT

Teachers' written responses to student writing cover a wide range, and through the kind and amount of response, they convey their values, beliefs, and priorities about language and learning, about the roles of teacher and student, and about the goals of writing. Researchers have found that students respond well to comments on concepts and structure, that the most effective comments are written in-process and focus attention on ideas and communication, and that a variety of responses, including peer responses, can be just as effective. Grammatical labels on final drafts are the most ineffective. Numerous attempts have been made to categorize teachers' responses; and while categories may differ among researchers, they seem to parallel each other in three areas: (1) the deficit model, which sees students as writers in need of remediation; (2) the developmental model, which sees student language as evolving; and (3) the contextual model, which incorporates the developmental model, adding another dimension, the discourse community. In a study of teacher response, 12 teachers at Lorain County Community College (Ohio) were asked to comment on one student essay. Most comments focused on mechanics, grammar, spelling, and organization, and the responses were categorized according to the three models, with the deficit model predominant (6 out of 12). Teachers must adopt a more comprehensive model, and to this end the contextual model is an ideal toward which they might strive. (Twenty-two references are attached; the student composition used in the study is appended.) (HB)

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EXAMINING THE CONSTRAINTS OF RESPONSE: WHAT ARE WE MODELING WHEN WE RESPOND TO STUDENT WRITING?

by

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Teachers' written responses to student writing cover a wide range. Some teachers make only a final pronouncement ("A" Excellent), many prefer marginal notes in the form of grammatical labels ("Frag" or "ww") or blind checks. Others use end comments that attend to structure by offering bland, obligatory judgements ("No Organ"), some use criteria-based lists or rubrics, a few respond to the content ("Why does he use violence?), while still fewer provide long narratives of personal response. Teachers respond to writing differently depending upon their primary focus--the text, the writer, the reader or the context. Through the kind and amount of response, they convey their values, beliefs, and priorities about language and learning, about the roles of teacher and student, and about the goals of writing.

Over the past thirty-five years, researchers have found that students responded well to explicit comments on concepts and structure (Ziv), that the most effective comments are written in-process and focus attention on ideas and communication, and that a variety of responses, including peer response, can be just as effective. Grammatical labels on final drafts are the most ineffective for the following reasons:

1. Students either do not understand comments or do not know how to use the information (Knoblauch and Brannon, Hodges, Wall and Hull).
2. Most comments are generic labels of mechanical errors, which are not text-specific and could be interchanged or "rubber-stamped" from paper to paper (Sommers, Harris).
3. Teachers do not prioritize their errors or offer strategies for revision (Sommers). Basic writers see <u>all</u> comments as mistakes that need correcting (Barnes).
4. Comments can appear contradictory, eg.: "condense" and "elaborate" (Grant-Davie and Shapiro, Hodges).

And lastly,

5. Neither marginal, nor terminal, nor a combination produces effective revision (Stiff).

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Despite these conclusions, seventy-five percent of teachers continue to emphasize "lower order concerns" of mechanics (Anson, p.343) instead of "higher order concerns" of thesis and development (Reigstad and McAndrew 11-19).

Some researchers have looked at the effect of different kinds of responses that teachers may use in one paper. Elaine Lees describes seven modes that range from teacher-centered to student-centered responses (as you can see on your outline):

1. Correcting -- promotes writer's block
2. Emoting -- "I'm offended and bored by this."
3. Describing -- "This paper is imprecise."
4. Suggesting -- "Make more effort to be fair here."
5. Questioning -- "Is it this simple?"
6. Reminding -- using words from class to check criteria
7. Assigning -- ask for another revision

Lees concludes that using a combination of approaches helps students indifferent stages to begin to take authority of their texts.

Louise Phelps divides comments into (1) **evaluative**, which treats the text as a final representation, (2) **formative**, which treats the text as evolving through drafts, (3) **developmental**, which sees the text as part of a portfolio, and (4) **contextual**, which examines the text in relationship to the discourse community. Instead of dismissing the first three models, Phelps, like Lees, shows how effective teachers can use all responses, depending upon various situations.

Recently, researchers have attempted to categorize teachers as readers to determine what guides their responses. Chris Anson, for example, uses Perry's Dualistic, Relativistic, and Reflective schema to show how teachers get stuck in immature stages of responding. Dualistic teachers see writing as right or wrong, focus on the surface features of the text, the final product only, and convey to students that there is an ideal, correct text through comments like, "sp" or "ww." Writing is a test, and the teacher is sole evaluator. If teachers read these texts as grammar police, they automatically read looking for error, expecting negative results, and undoubtedly they will find them (See also Williams who proved how we read student papers differently from professionals).

A second group, relativists, focus not on the text but on the writer, and seldom write in the margins, saving their response for the end with comments like "This is an interesting point" or " I don't understand" to show that judgements are personal and often idiosyncratic. However, Anson wants teachers to develop into a more comprehensive third stage.

Reflective responders analyze the rhetorical situation and context and act as representative readers who judge according to criteria established by the writer's intentions and community negotation. Reflective responses include textual, reader, and contextual responses.

Another group of researchers, Tilly Warnock, Patricia Murray, and Ron Lunsford, show in separate studies how teachers' literary theories influence their responses. Lunsford asked Peter Elbow, Chris Anson, Richard Larson, Ed White and others to respond to a single student paper and later described their styles as current traditionalists, new critics, social constructionists, etc., depending upon whether or not their focus was local (in the text), personal, or global.

Warnock categorizes responders into seventeen schools of criticism under five major headings, according to focus on text, author, subject, reader, or context. She describes the Philological, Genre, and New Critic, similar to Anson's dualistic responders, as someone who focuses on text--word choice, structure, and convention--over content. Author-centered responders looked at development of ideas with questions, such as: "Write in your own voice" and "What do you mean?" (p. 68). Subject-centered readers judge whether or not support for a theme is adequate. Reader-centered teachers, recognizing that the product is not a complete representation of the writer's intentions, try to analyze intentions as they create new texts by reading.

Warnock's final type is the contextual responder, who like Anson's reflective responder, takes text, author, reader, and subject into consideration, viewing writing as communication within a community.

Jim Corder describes the complexity of responding:

> For every paper a student submits to the writing instructor, there are parallel texts: what has been written, what the student thinks has been written, what the student would like to have written, and, significantly, the text the instructor creates in the reading. (In Lawson, p. 87)

Add to this the text created when a tutor or peer rereads the paper, and the complexity of interpreting meaning is daunting.

While categories may differ among the researchers above, they seem to parallel each other in three areas. These three categories I define as: the **deficit model**, the **developmental model**, and the **contextual model**. While no list is adequate to cover the wide range of responses, these models show a progression from teacher-centered to rhetorically-based writing, from a focus on product to context.

During Spring quarter 1991, we examined how twelve teachers at Lorain County Community College responded to one student essay written for a freshman composition course (See Appendix). The number of responses on a paper ranged from thirteen to fifty-two, with an average of twenty-nine. Most wrote a combination of marginal and short end comments, none of which were prioritized. One teacher referenced her comments to an attached, detailed 8 1/2 by 14" rubric. Seventy-five percent of responders wrote more grammar comments than content. Most comments focused on mechanics, organization, coherence, and

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spelling. Only five gave one comment of praise. Grades ranged from C to F. Surprisingly, we found no differences in responses based upon full or part-time status, degrees, or composition studies. What we did find was a predominance of the deficit model (six out of twelve). Three followed a developmental model (focusing on subject or writer). Others could not be categorized primarily under one model or another. Examples of teacher responses will be given under each model described below.

The deficit model sees students as writers in need of remediation. It is assumed their writing will have "errors," "problems," "insufficient thinking." Teachers, the keepers of knowledge, will mold students into a close approximation of the ideal text. The product represents all that the student is capable of, and he is judged only in the final draft by how well he conforms to the model. In fact, avoidance of error is more important than content. Teachers' comments are vague commands: "Pay attention to word choice," "awk," "coh," "shift," and are focused on surface errors. The tone is authoritative, even hostile. The student is lost and becomes passive. Tutors are deluged with a multitude of symbols they must translate--if they can understand them. They also realize that their best strategy is to look for patterns of predominant errors and focus first on them since it is too late for thesis or development. The teacher's concept of revision is to "clean up" the mechanics.

What should be encouraged is the developmental model that sees students' language as evolving and sees error as growth and risk-taking. The focus is on the process, on drafts of evolving thought. The teacher and tutor are coaches. The student is active in the process and is evaluated by teacher and other students. The product represents one text among many texts: the writers' intentions, earlier drafts, the reader's creation of text. Response is in positive and easily understood terms that specifically relate to content and style. Those responses we found in this mode sounded like: "Needs a specific example," "Develop this idea a bit further," "I'm not sure what you mean by this." The student is also given direction for future papers.

A third model, the contextual model, incorporates the developmental model and adds another dimension, the discourse community. While many scholars have focused on the individual writer, many are now holding a social constructionist view of writing as negotiation within a community. The teacher's role is to initiate students into the community and act as a representative among many readers. Evaluation is according to rhetorical concerns, how well the writer has expressed his intentions and met the needs of his audience. Comments look like: "I'm confused here. I need more description" and "Why is that the case?" In addition, the instructor may set out specific objectives for each paper by which students are judged.

The contextual model is an ideal toward which we all strive. It takes time to individualize and contextualize comments. It's much easier to write "CS." Until teachers adopt

a more comprehensive model, however, all of us must make our comments explicit and teach students how to be a reader of responses.

APPENDIX A

SECRETARIAL PROCEDURES VS. WAITRESSING

In many ways secretarial activities compare with the procedures in waitressing. Being able to associate with people and many attitudes is foremost.

A person holding the position of a secretary must be able to handle themselves with potential clients, co-workers and especially their employers. Attitudes of people change without notice and when these changes occur a "good" secretary must remain respectful and professional.

A waitress must have the same professional attitude when dealing with her customers, co-workers and again her employer. "The customer is always right" and a good waitress will cater to the customers' needs. Again the attitudes of people change without notice and in a position where you deal with hundreds of people and attitudes a day you must be able to remain respectful and professional.

Most secretarial positions go with a set salary. They are paid a salary according the work that needs to be done. Whether or not the task is completed, the secretary is still paid. Granted, if several tasks are not completed on a regular basis the secretary is not performing up to her duty promises and it is possible her job may be terminated.

A waitress does not make very much an hour but the tips that she accumulates is averaged in as her hourly rate. The ability to keep a good attitude toward every customer will lead to a better tip for the waitress. There are many tasks that a waitress is expected ot do and again if the waitress is not able to live up to what is expected, her job can also be terminated. The ability to serve your customers and the tips you receive can tell a lot about how good of a waitress you are.

For both the secretary and the waitress, along with the rewards if their profession comes stress. A secretary deals with mostly emotional stress. A secretary's performance ultimately reflects on her company and most of all her boss. Knowing that her work wil be a apart of the company permanently, causes constant striving for perfection. There are many procedures that a secretary must learn such as the company's style for letters and memos; new computer systems that maybe they have not used before; how to deal with each individual person and to live up to the expectations that were given her. A secretary must be able to do several tasks at the same time and be awsare of exactly what is going on.

A waitress must also deal with mental stress. Remember what orders go to which table, what the specials are for the day, and what dinners get salad. But unlike a secretary, a waitress deals more in strenuous work. Running around with full trays, serving and cleaning up. A waitress muset be able to handle herself with a lot of customers as well as be able to handle herself with only one customer. The balance changes with the amount of customers. A waitress follows a pattern when serving, stating at one end of the dining room; the waitress can stop at each table and check everything, but when working with only one customer the waitresss must be careful not to continuously go to the table.

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